

Advent 4 – Love
“Love Came Down”
Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25
December 18, 2022
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¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,

and they shall name him Emmanuel’,

which means, ‘God is with us.’ ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

I was talking with someone this week who was sharing with me about his faith journey. Just a couple of years ago, he made a decision to fully surrender his life to Jesus and to start living by faith, and he described how his life had changed since that time. He described a change of heart and a change of mind that he had experienced, and there was one thing he said about his thinking before fully trusting Jesus that caught my attention. He said before, his basic attitude or feeling about God was “why does God hate me?” Especially when difficult things would happen, and in the midst of bad experiences it felt like God must not be very good, or caring, or on his side.

I was struck by that comment and that description of how he used to think God felt about him, because I think he articulated something that a lot of people feel whether they come out and say it so clearly or not. Generally, people are prone to believe that there is a God of some kind out there who has power and the ability to influence things in the world or in our lives. A 2018 Pew Research Survey reported that 90% of Americans believe in some kind of Higher Power, but along with that belief I think there is something in our human nature that questions and wonders, is God really *for* me or *against* me? Ancient people were never sure. They were convinced that there were supernatural powers and beings that were controlling things in the world that were beyond their control, but those things didn’t always seem to be controlled in ways that were to their benefit – things like the weather or conflicts that they got into with enemies - so they came up with all kinds of rituals and sacrifices that they hoped would convince the gods to act for them. Modern people do this in our own way by trying to make deals and

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/25/key-findings-about-americans-belief-in-god/>

bargain with God. We approach God with a transactional kind of mindset thinking that we can win God's favor if we make a few personal sacrifices here and there. If I do things that I think will make God happy, maybe make a special donation to a charity, God will reward me. If I avoid doing things that would make God mad, I won't lie to my boss anymore, God will keep bad things from happening to me.

Given that life does get messy and painful and given that so many terrible things do happen in the world, it's not surprising that we would wonder if God is really for us or against us. It's easy to wonder if Joseph questioned whether God was for or against him when Mary revealed to him that she was pregnant and that he wasn't the father. Joseph was righteous and faithful and now she had unfairly gotten them both into this shameful situation, and this story she was telling was so unbelievable. I think Joseph probably wanted to believe her, but how could he, and there were no good options. He could expose her and have her stoned to fulfill the requirement of the law in a case like this, or he could divorce her which would minimize the controversy but it didn't do anything to relieve any feelings of hurt and betrayal. Maybe he didn't wonder, but it's not hard to imagine Joseph wanting to know how God could let something like this happen to him. God, if you're for me, why has everything gone wrong?

We all either have or we will experience things that give us the feeling, or at least make us wonder if "God hates me," or God is against me. Bad things happen and sometimes life doesn't go according to plan, and sometimes we feel lost, and alone, and scared, and we may doubt our own worth, *but* on this 4th Sunday of Advent the good news that we celebrate is the good news that God does not hate us and God is not against us. If you have been told that, or it has been suggested to you, or if for any reason have felt it or believed it in your heart, let me say again what God's word tells us is true. God does not hate you, and God is not against you. The birth of Jesus that we are preparing to celebrate confirms that the exact opposite is the truth. Jesus comes to us revealing that God is full of love for us and God is *for* us, all the time and in every circumstance in our lives.

The good news that we are loved by God is what the whole story of the Bible reveals, and it's spelled out clearly in specific verses like I John 4:9 that says, *"This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him,"* or Psalm 86:15 which says, *"But you, Lord, are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness,"* or Romans 8:39 which tells us that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. One of the other places that we see it spelled out clearly is right there in the Gospel text that we read this morning. Just when Joseph may have been feeling like God wasn't for him, an angel appeared to give him the assurance that despite the way he was feeling, and despite the complexity and oddness of the situation he was in, God was with him and for him, and, in fact, what God was doing through Joseph and Mary's lives was being done so that all people could know that God loves us all. The angel revealed to Joseph what had been revealed to Mary – that the baby that Mary was carrying was not an ordinary baby. This baby was the fulfillment of God's promise, the sure sign of God's love for and faithfulness to God's people, and the names he would be given would describe how he would be the sign of God's love and faithfulness. The angel told Joseph that the baby would

be known by two names. He would be called Jesus, or Yeshua, which means Savior, and he would save his people from their sins. And he would be known as Immanuel, which means “God is with us.”

If you are in love with someone, or you have children, or other family members and friends whom you love, and you think about how you love them or what loving them inspires you to do, I expect that there are two things that are true. One is that you want to help the people that you love. If there is something that they aren't able to do for themselves, or something that you see them struggling with, and you have the ability to help them, love moves you to help them. You don't want to see someone you love struggling, or suffering, or missing out on something so you take care of loved ones when they're sick, or you provide things that they need, or you lend a hand so that they can accomplish something they couldn't have done without your help. Helping is a way we show love, and a second thing that is true, is that when we love someone, we want to be around them. Who doesn't want to hang out with your grandchildren? Who doesn't love to reconnect with friends from out of town? When couples fall in love, especially in the early stages, you look for ways to spend as much time together as possible. Even if it's just going to the grocery store together, if you're going with the person you love, it's exciting because you want to be together. It's not just in the good times, though. I've seen people spend hours and days next to a loved one who is declining in a hospital bed. I've seen some of you doing that. When someone you love is going through something tragic, you go to be with them. Again, I know some of you who have gone to be with children going through divorces, or children who have suffered accidents and injuries. When we love people, we want to be with them.

Our Scripture this morning tells us that In Jesus, God demonstrates God's love for us in these same ways. God has given us a Savior because God wants to help us not harm us. We all need the help that God has provided for us in our Savior, Jesus. We are all stubborn and hard-hearted at times. We make foolish decisions, and we act selfishly, and we get seduced by things that aren't good for us, and we get ourselves into messes, and we cause harm to ourselves and to others, and God wants to help us. God wants to forgive us for our faults and failures – for both the things that we did and we do wrong knowingly, and God also wants to answer the prayer that Jesus prayed from his cross. “Forgive them for they know not what they do.” By giving us a Savior God proves that God is for us and proves that we are loved, and that goes for everyone. There is no one that is beyond the reach of God's mercy or outside of the reach of the saving work of Jesus Christ.

And our Scripture tells us that in Jesus, God has shown us that God wants to be with us. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us. I know that sometimes people feel that God doesn't want to be around “someone like me.” I have heard people say those exact words, but we see it right here in our Scripture this morning that that isn't true. If God was against us, God would not go to the trouble of putting on flesh and coming to live in our midst. God wouldn't initiate contact and pursue a relationship with us if God didn't love us or want to be with us, but God *does* want to be with us. God wants to be with us now in our lives, in the good times in our lives and as we struggle through the difficult times, and God wants to be with us and wants us to be with God forever in eternity. This is why God comes to us as Immanuel.

Even if we say that we know and believe that we are loved by God, it is good to have the reassurance that is given to us on this 4th Sunday of Advent. Knowing that we are loved deeply, and constantly, and steadfastly by God sets us free from fear of punishment and condemnation, and sparks joy that gets expressed in worship, and obedience, and love for others. And that brings us back to the Trouper's play. In the play, we saw the characters doing a really terrible job at loving others, and we probably identified with them a little. Some people are just hard to love, but Jesus didn't put any exception clauses in when he told us to love our neighbors as ourselves. In fact, he even emphasized the point that we are called to love people who are hard to love. In Luke 6:32 he asks, "if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" and then in verse 35 he says, "love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." The birth of Jesus tells us that we are loved by God beyond the shadow of a doubt. Jesus comes so that we don't have to walk around wondering, "why does God hate me?" We can know that we are loved wholly, and unconditionally, and lavishly. That is the gift and the comfort that God gives, but the challenge as we contemplate the love God has given and that we have received is that we pass that same kind of love on to others. We are reminded that God has loved us despite the fact that we have behaved badly and it's in that knowledge that we find not just the strength but even a desire to try to love others in the way that we have been loved. Listen to I John 4:7-11. *"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.*

On this 4th Sunday of Advent, know that love has come and love has come just for you. Whoever we are, whatever we've done or haven't done, whether anyone else likes us or loves us or not, Jesus is the proof of God's love for us. We can know it, and we are being reminded to share that good news with others. What better way to help someone who may be wondering if God is for them that God is for them and that God does love them, by loving them and being for them ourselves. Jesus's love and light shine through us when we do. Amen.